

Gwyneth Jones's first novel, *Divine Endurance* (1984) offers intriguing suggestions for book-travellers interested in notions of feminine estrangement, displacement, desire.

Notions of estrangement, in this text, frame issues related to boundaries social, physical and virtual, involving a female cyborg¹ and her human lover. Jones's associative chain (cyborg-human-boundaries-estrangement) may hinge on the fact remarked upon, in a different context, by David Tomas that the transorganic data based cyborg is "intimately connected to the social and symbolic functions of traditional *rites of passage* rituals", hence to the exploration of liminal spaces (*Cyberspace*, 31-47). In this particular case, Jones also appears to join other contemporary post-modernist women writers in an epistemological inquiry into the liminalities of narrative boundaries.

Reading this science-fictional tale, one wonders, in fact, whether the displacement of desire that one encounters may not be typical of fictionalized non/human relations. In fiction, the cyborg is usually cast as the alien "other" whose desire is either directed toward the satisfaction of primary needs inimical to humankind, or — when directed toward a human object — seeks but seldom finds a functional interface. Whatever its source or direction, desire is of course structural to narration, and in romance as well as in utopian fiction the theme of desire, with its ample gestures of deferment, displacement, denial, closure and satisfaction, may acquire meta-narrative overtones for the discerning reader.

My particular interest in this novel is that it poses narrative questions on how to speak the cyborg and with the cyborg the cyborg being an/other, a site of difference exposed by technology, a locus of otherness produced by the interface of the human and not-human, a nexus of permeable and moveable boundaries which undermines identity claims. It seems to me that just as the language of science is the language of

patriarchal story-telling, as Donna Haraway and others have shown, so the language of the technological imagination is the language of myth.

For if, as Roland Barthes explained, myth is a type of speech, a metalanguage whose double function is to make us understand something and at the same time to impose it upon us, myth is also the perfect tool to make technology appear accessible and familiar as well as, eventually, innocent and lovable. It may help us achieve imaginative distance from something that we experience as dangerously close, or lend affective value to alien, unfamiliar objects and events, or, as Barthes said, give natural justification to a historical intention, "making contingency appear eternal". It may also, I would add, function as a narrative two-way mirror between experience and fiction, between the signifier, the signified, and the sign, and tell the unfulfillable promise of a magic, universal interface.

As a story-teller, Gwyneth Jones in my view holds many of the qualities Barthes attributed to the mythologist. I may be influenced, in this assessment, by her own statement in a 1988 speech where she described her narrative as "the (re) working of myth". For myth, she explained, is not just "the fall from heaven, the Soul's search for Love, the Corn King and the Spring Queen". Or rather, those are the philosophy, whereas myth that works is Fantasy, and Science Fiction is "the rough surface stuff that actually works as against the abstruse theory". But when the book jacket for *Divine Endurance* was being designed, she objected to the book being labelled "a Fantasy Novel" because the public connects Fantasy with the "not real". Science fiction, on the other hand, is a binary encoder capable of showing alternating realities ("Riddles", 180-183).

However, mythical patterns recur in Jones's novels. They explore the outer edge of human experience through the theme

of the quest; the stormy setting is that of impending apocalypse. But the joys of non/human interface hold out no promise of eternal return either in *Divine Endurance* or in Jones's second novel, *Escape Plans* (1986).

Of the two novels, the first could be termed a fable. Jones explains that, throughout the book, she was trying to find "a diction" for the high-tech elements which to an outsider, to an innocent bystander, may appear to be magic. And indeed it seems to me that the binary encoding causes the text to alternate, like a hologram, between fable and science fiction. *Escape Plans*, instead, could be classified as an early cyberpunk novel; published the year before Pat Cadigan's *Mindplayers* (1987), it describes a dystopian society peopled by computer-wired human beings. However, Jones designed the cyberpunk elements to reinforce the true purpose of the novel which, she explains,

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"was to map the boundary between earth and heaven. I invented a world that was the Aristotelian earth, a black hole in the middle of the universe (if universes have middles); and sent in a redeemer from the unimaginable outside".

Jones's "mental experiment" involved stripping the female protagonist, ALIC, to a state of "pure necessity" and imagining for her some kind of undebunkable heaven:

"Nothingness happening and happening forever, the creative void, event without duration, where earth and time do not exist, where no process is irreversible so no 'harm' can ever be done",

so that one could glimpse "what lay on the other side" ("Riddles", 178-79).

Sexual intercourse between an alien and a human repre-

